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AUTHOR Bown, Lalage
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ABSTRACT

A conviction that democracy required for its citizens access to knowledge and to habits of critical thought has been recognized as a driving dynamic behind educators such as Albert Mansbridge. Britons must reshape their vision for the turn of the millennium, but they need to draw on their inheritance, on the understanding of their predecessors that democracy's promises will always fail without opportunities for the general public to learn about the issues of their time. The roots of this legacy date back 350 years to John Milton who had a view of a social contract based on human freedom and stood for an unrestricted curriculum. Respect and public support should be given to curricula negotiated by learners themselves. Signs of hope are in voluntary organizations for adult learning. They have three characteristics: they are membership bodies, they have adult learning as a major or primary function, and they are held together by some kind of collective social purpose. They may be concerned with broad policies, devoted to the interests of a defined group, or concentrated on a single issue or cluster of issues. However, voluntary organizations need a new look--a perception of adult education as a movement. Adult educators should question orthodoxies of today, include a community development dimension, increase international communication, and study ways of assessing information supplied by computer or the mass electronic media. (YLB)

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Learning, Liberty and Social Purpose: A reminder of our radical liberal inheritance in Adult Education and some thoughts on its future

FIFTEENTH ALBERT MANSBRIDGE MEMORIAL LECTURE

BY

Lalage Bown
Professor Emeritus, University of Glasgow
and Honorary Professor, University of Warwick

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION

1995

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17 November 1994

University of Leeds
Department of Adult Continuing Education
Leeds LS2 9JT

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Additional Dedication

This lecture is in honour of Albert Mansbridge and also in memory of **Laura Cossey**, who died on 16 November 1994. As flatmate and friend, long-time WEA member and staunch trade unionist, she was not only my student during my apprentice period but also my teacher, always humane and honest in both criticism and encouragement. In her experience, the development of her own potential and the sense of purpose which she gained from the WEA, she was an embodiment of the significance of a voluntary learning organisation. She was also one of the most serene people I have ever met.

Learning, Liberty and Social Purpose: A Reminder of our Radical Liberal Inheritance in Adult Education and Some Thoughts on Its Future

> In our model democracy
> the magic promises of yesterday
> lie cold like mounds of dead cattle
> along caravans that lead nowhere –
> secular sermons wage war
> for souls denied the habit of thought:
> spewed from talking boxes
> divine falsehoods protect us from ourselves.
>
> Odia Ofeimun, 1980.

> Open democracies must have critically literate citizens.
>
> Richard Hoggart, 1992.

1. Albert Mansbridge and Education for Democracy

Albert Mansbridge's legacy, through the Workers' Educational Association, was a strong influence on my professional formation as an adult educator, and I am moved and proud to have been invited to speak in commemoration of Mansbridge's achievements. His ideas and those of his collaborators in the adult education movement – William Temple, R H Tawney, Mabel Tylecote – are part of our inheritance as adult educators. Today, in Mansbridge's honour, I should like to do three things: to review the concept of the relation of learning to democracy; to renew the debate about the role of voluntary learning organisations within a democratic country, and to suggest how we might build on the Mansbridge and WEA inheritance for the twenty-first century.

The nature of democratic government has once again become an important question for us. Both the USA and the United Kingdom use "good governance", defined as multi-party democracy, as a condition for economic, political and defence support; we have seen the collapse of repression in South Africa and are witnessing attempts there to

construct a new democracy; and the successor-states of the Soviet empire are struggling too to establish democratic regimes. Flocks of political parties and long queues at polling booths, however, may be a starting point, but obviously are not enough. The structures and the paraphernalia will only work if a critical mass of citizens, including the politicians, know enough, understand enough and care enough to make them work.

A conviction that democracy required for its citizens access to knowledge, and to habits of critical thought was a driving dynamic behind all Albert Mansbridge's activities. The WEA was founded to provide such access to the working class, particularly to members of unions, co-operatives and the other voluntary organisations which are a characteristic of our system. In Mansbridge's vision of democracy, equality was implicit and also freedom of association, and it was, therefore, logical that learning for democracy should take place within a membership body, itself democratic. About equality, it is always to be remembered that the two foundation members of the WEA were Mr and Mrs Mansbridge, each subscribing the equivalent of 25 pence, so that the Association started from an equality of gender.

During its first ninety-one years, the WEA has enabled very many people, with less or more education, to gain confidence, to acquire skills both in learning and in conducting a democratic association within the larger democratic polity, and to evaluate for themselves the arguments and slogans of professional pundits, politicians and the media, including Odia Ofeimun's "talking boxes". It is not surprising that a substantial proportion of members entering Parliament at the end of the Second World War owed their education in part to the Association and we should note that even in an era where more formal education has been more widely available, the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party lists his education, in *Who's Who*, as Ellesmere Port Secondary Modern and the WEA.

Mansbridge evolved his vision of a democratic learning organisation within the framework of the liberal state with its associated consensus politics. Now that the prevailing view of the state has changed and become minimalist, and consensus is far more problematic, is Mansbridge's vision relevant any more? The aim of this lecture is to contend that we will have to shape our own vision, for the turn of the millennium, but that we need to draw on our inheritance, on the understanding of our predecessors that democracy's "magic promises"

will always fail without opportunities for the general public to learn about the issues of our time and to judge them on the basis of logic and articulated principles, rather than prejudice.

2. John Milton and Liberty to Learn

I have used the word *inheritance*, rather than *heritage*, because the latter has become emotive (evoking warm fuzzy feelings). Secondly, it tends largely to be used in reference only to the physically manifest – the natural and built environments; here, I am referring to the intellectual and social environments, the intangible inheritance of ideas, relationships, social and political arrangements. Thirdly, heritage is about preservation with minimal change, while my motive here is developmental, to trace the roots in order to nurture new growth.

First, then, the roots. Some of the key ideas behind the British democratic system were generated in the seventeenth century and it was then that one of the most eloquent and powerful voices was raised in defence of the freedom to learn. Three hundred and fifty years ago this month, John Milton published his *Areopagitica, a speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England*. *Areopagitica* is not a title which would be recognised in the average bus queue, but the book's advocacy of the right to learn is worth celebrating and its principles worth remembering today.

Because of his very great stature as a poet, we often forget that Milton played an active part in the revolutionary events of his time. He was an indefatigable writer of political pamphlets, always on the side of Parliament, but with alternative visions of how a new English constitution could be framed – he was at one point very impressed with the Scottish tradition of elective monarchy, but moved on to become a republican, a whole-hearted supporter of Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector, and was one of the Latin or Foreign Secretaries to the Council of State from 1649 to 1660 (the other was a fellow-poet, Andrew Marvell). The post was appropriate to Milton, as a scholar at home in Latin and as a man who had travelled more widely in Europe than most of his contemporaries. His flow of political writings only ceased when he was briefly jailed after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 – by which time he was already virtually blind.

Throughout, Milton was a passionate defender of personal, religious and political liberty. He defended the right to divorce, he was

suspicious of the intolerant fundamentalism of the Presbyterians and tried desperately to persuade Cromwell to avoid tyranny and corruption (the "sleaze" of those times):

> Help us to save free Conscience from the paw
> Of hireling wolves whose gospel is their maw.

He was more conscious than many of the historic character of the changes going on around him, with the whole basis of and justification for English government being called into question. He saw the country undergoing what he called "strong and healthful commotions to a general reforming" and acknowledged that at such times all sorts of false notions appear, but also that they gave opportunities "not only to look back and revise what hath been taught heretofore, but to gain further and go on to some new enlightened steps in the discovery of truth". In a famous sentence he says: "where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making".

Milton's political and constitutional ideas changed over time, but at this stage he brought up the idea of the social contract, used and developed by subsequent thinkers. This emerged from his view, expressed pungently in a later work (1649) that: "all men are naturally born free". Their freedom is seen as constituting *freedom to*, rather than *freedom from* – that is, the social contract provides opportunities for thought and action; it does not imply a simple absence of restraint.

The two principles of the *Areopagitica* on which I want to focus today arise from Milton's view of a social contract based on human freedom. The first is that there should be the widest possible access to knowledge and that it should not be shut away from the people, either on grounds of privilege or on grounds of the ordinary person's incapacity to make judgements. He upbraids his colleagues for the suggestion that the common people are unfit to be exposed freely to uncensored knowledge; do they take them, he asks: "for a giddy, vicious and ungrounded people, in such a sick and weak state of faith and discretion as to be able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licenser?" Only by the opportunity to exercise judgements can learners develop discrimination. "I cannot", he says, "praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary . . . Assuredly, we bring not innocence into the

world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is trial and trial is by what is contrary . . . Since, therefore, the knowledge and survey of vice is, in this world, so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read".

We attach another meaning to the word *promiscuous*, but through the archaic language and the unfamiliar theological references, the passion for a freedom to learn shines through. And the argument develops into two messages which have a very current relevance. One message is to beware of attempts to *monopolise* learning and Milton condemns the attitude that: "when the new light which we beg for shines in upon us, there be those who envy and oppose if it come not first in at their casements". He stands for equality of access.

He also stands for an unrestricted curriculum – and this is the second principle. "Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolised and traded in by tickets and statutes and standards." This is because of the value he sets upon the liberty to learn, but also because, very practically, over-regulation of curriculum will prevent originality and the development of new ideas. "Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition."

At this point, I hope it is clear why, 350 years on, I want to celebrate *Areopagitica*. Milton himself went off later into some extraordinary political by-paths, but this text is a very current reminder that people should have the freedom to choose their own curricula and not be restricted by "tickets and statutes and standards", imposed by others.

Adult education providers, such as the universities and the WEA, are being forced by funding requirements into ticketing courses in ways which are both restrictive and unpalatable to many thinking women and men. The *restrictiveness* is because courses are in danger of being limited to skills and asserted facts rather than including access to ideas and development of criteria for discriminating between the credible and the less credible. The *unpalatability* is because adult learners come to courses with a very wide variety of motives and purposes and an externally controlled curriculum depends on someone else's view of what their motives and purposes should be.

Perhaps I should make it clear that, along with Milton, I believe in the importance of open access to formal learning and I deplore the economic barriers thrown up against many able adults who would benefit and enrich higher education by their presence. The chance of qualifications is desperately important. But both individuals and society have other learning needs. There are roles to be learned: school governor; trade unionist; elected councillor (even – dare I say – Member of Parliament). There are issues to be understood: choice and the market; the consequences of genetic engineering; the meaning of belonging to Europe; the imbalances in human development round the world. For such purposes, credentials are not necessarily appropriate and may, in fact, be inhibiting to profundity of ideas.

In these cases, the image of a Danish adult educator, Christian Kold, may apply. He said: "If you plant a stone in the ground, you will need a marker to show where you buried it. If you plant a seed in the ground, the shoots will show where it was". Success in a role, increased civic awareness, less racism in society, such outcomes of learning do not need the marker of certificates. And yet it is just such gains in learning which can provide support for more formal types of education. Adults who have themselves gained an insight into the issues become advocates for education. And it is adult education which is uniquely fitted to provide role education and issue-based education.

The argument, then, is for respect and public support to be given to curricula negotiated by learners themselves. The United Kingdom has been notably capable of such work, as has been shown by the Scottish Community Education system, which, for all its limitations, has been based on a respect for adult learners' own judgements about what they wish to learn, and also by the Open University's Community provision, which gives a framework for learning but does not hamper diversity of interests. In Miltonic terms, such learning programmes do not devalue adult learners as "able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licenser".

There *is* an attractiveness in the idea of national standards and there may be circumstances in which they are seriously useful (although I always remember the remark in *The Peter Principle* (1969) that "competence, like truth, beauty and contact lenses, is in the eye of the beholder"). For all adults whose purposes are outside the Further Education regimen, tickets and statutes may simply be a disincentive; and it is an irony that the very well-fought campaign by national

membership adult education bodies to gain continued financing at the time of the last Education Act had the result of designating the WEA as part of the Further Education system, treated by the Funding Council as another, albeit peculiar, college entity. The Association is subject to inspections and targets which are without reference to the notion that it might be seen as primarily accountable to its members.

Whereas the WEA is so far keeping up attendances, the new constraints, coupled with fee increases, have resulted in a reported severe decline in numbers taking part in other agencies' adult classes. In this situation, one could almost echo William Wordsworth's sonnet:

> Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour
> England hath need of thee: she is a fen
> Of stagnant waters . . ."[1]

3. Voluntary Organisation and Social Purpose

Having suggested that we can gain from the past the core principles of democratic learning and the right to learn without externally imposed curricula, and having warned of the danger of stagnation in our present bureaucratised adult education system, let me identify where there might be signs of hope.

I mentioned at the start Mansbridge's great achievement in developing the WEA. Although there are ancestors, such as the Corresponding Societies in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, or the Chautauqua Movement in the US in the nineteenth century, voluntary organisation for adult learning has been a twentieth century phenomenon, both here and abroad. Such organisations have three characteristics: they are membership bodies; they have adult learning as a major or primary function; and they are held together by some kind of collective social purpose. They can, obviously, only operate in a society which allows freedom of association – which we may take for granted, but which may be difficult or may be forbidden in many other countries. For instance, analogues of the WEA were persecuted and suppressed in several African countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Their membership numbers were not sufficient to make them difficult to put down; but of course strong and well-organised memberships sometimes can resist and earn the respect even of governments inimical to alternative sources of authority. This was the

case with the People's Educational Association of Ghana, which was so well established throughout the country that it was almost the only non-governmental organisation apart from the churches to survive the latter days of Kwame Nkrumah's regime – when a popular democracy had become a centralised tyranny.

It is also part of the picture that such organisations are the creation and creature of their members. There were apparently very successful adult learning associations set up by the state in the Soviet empire and its satellites, for example the all-Union Zhnanye in the USSR; but since they were part of the state apparatus, they fell apart when that apparatus fell apart. One of the depressing aftermaths of that disintegration was that adult education and the idea of adult education associations earned a bad name in Central and Eastern Europe because they had had no independent life within communities (one example of the many weaknesses of the fiction that Soviet state power was the people's power). Voluntarism does not rule out state support – although, as we have already seen, the directions of state support can influence heavily the activities of voluntary adult education bodies in this country. But at the end of the day, the members have to make the decisions – even sometimes the hard decision to go without some external finance or other support, because of conditions tied to it.

Why take on the responsibility for such decisions? Why join together at all for learning and not simply go as individuals to some providing college or other official institution? Part of the answer should, of course, be that in a voluntary association the members control the curriculum. We have seen that at present this is not wholly true in the case of the WEA, but it is still the guiding idea behind the Association's practice. In other organisations with some learning function, it is still entirely true. For instance, the major women's organisations, such as the Townswomen's Guilds and the Women's Institutes have maintained complete control over their own programmes (a cynic might say that this is because the government's educational financing of these bodies is very small – and this may well be the explanation!).

The other significant reason for coming together in a voluntary organisation is a common adherence to what I have called a social purpose. This slightly old-fashioned phrase is more embracing than any other I can find, and I use it to include the very limited goal of sociability as well as a more assertive commitment to some form of change in the community or the polity.

Sociability – coming together to learn in common, with the motive of meeting others, gaining a sense of affiliation, is a strong propellant when societies are fragmented and individuals alienated. This is not only true in our own country. When I was collecting data last year in Uganda on women's motivation for coming to educational clubs, a dominant explanation was that the club meeting was the one afternoon in the month when women could join with others and feel part of a sisterhood. As one told me: "I can put on decent clothes and feel valued as a person".

In those contexts, quite often the initial drive for sociability becomes something more. An Indian woman, Rajkumari, reflecting on what she had learned from joining a women's literacy group, said: "I have learned the following: to read and write; to realise the real position of women in society; that continued effort can undo the impossible; that indulging in developmental programmes assures continued increase in courage" (Shrinivasta, in *Duke*, 1990). This touching, if slightly incoherent, statement, shows not only that Rajkumari, through her educational experience had become conscientised in the Freirean sense (becoming aware of "the real position of women in society"), but also that she had gained the impulsion to take part in community development activity and even to think of "undoing the impossible" (or what it had formerly seemed impossible to undo).

A more articulate commitment is usually part of the drive behind voluntary organisations in our own country – a commitment to some form of social, political or economic change. The larger organisations may be concerned with broad policies; some may be devoted to the interests of a defined group; others may concentrate on a single issue, or cluster of issues.

Let me give examples of each type of organisation for the sake of clarity. The largest one, all-inclusive in membership eligibility, is the WEA, now divided into four associations – one for England and Scotland, one for Northern Ireland and one each for North and South Wales. That division was another consequence of the conditions for continued state funding. One of its overt, constitutional aims has always been to improve government educational policies. In earlier years, WEA members were heavily involved in national educational commissions and committees, as was Mansbridge himself in his day, or they campaigned in the style of Milton for a fairer system, as did Tawney; and educational issues still stir up the most intense passions at

WEA conferences. Desire to preserve some democratic elements in formal education has led to quite practical activity such as the organising of training for school governors. This is a very healthy combination of macro and grassroots interest in change.

Behind the constitutional statement, there is also the traditional commitment to working-class interests, and the ethos of the WEA to provide (often in the past in partnership with the universities) a platform for discussion of topical matters of public concern. As a result, a WEA branch may, as a group, take up a particular cause. Examples are the campaign to support the demolition of *apartheid* in South Africa, or in Scotland the attempt to keep public water supplies in public hands. Such moves are never part of WEA policy as such, but evolve from the WEA's desire to air important issues. In Northern Ireland, the urge to peace is obviously part of the WEA's implied concern and in that light there is, in the Northern Ireland WEA's latest annual report, a poignant flavour to the matter-of-fact statement: "The study of human behaviour seems to be a popular activity around the Derry area".

As an example of a voluntary organisation based in a defined interest group, which has a major learning focus, let me take one of the women's organisations, the Townswomen's Guilds. Many people tend to discount such bodies and to forget that they have an educational role; but their significance was highlighted at the time of the last Education Bill, when the TG and the Women's Institutes emerged in the forefront of the campaign to save funding for voluntary adult education. They took the lead in the Adult Education Forum of seven constituent agencies and the other members of the Forum acknowledge the effectiveness of their role in salvaging some grant money for the voluntary supporters of adult learning.

The Townswomen's Guilds were initiated by Mrs Corbett-Ashby, who was a prominent member of the movement for women's suffrage, since she saw that women voters needed to be able to educate themselves, as citizens and as members of a society which she hoped would be changed by the extension of suffrage. The Guilds are conducted with a care for democratic procedures which would put many other bodies to shame, but without the pedantry which tends to afflict some male-dominated organisations (such as trade unions). Further, because they operate in a decentralised way, the Guilds are very much grassroots organisations while retaining a capacity for national educational campaigns.

The Guilds' style is to undertake research on an issue, sound out members' opinions, organise seminars and finally mount a campaign if they are convinced change is needed. Their current research is on the benefits system as it applies to carers for the sick, disabled and elderly and they have devoted the bulk of their government educational grant this year to the enquiry. The current seminar programme is focused on genetic engineering, and one of the current campaigns is to change the law regarding a defence plea of provocation in homicide cases (as part of it a 40,000 signature petition has been presented). This sort of activity is very much learning for a social purpose, conscientisation and reflection followed by advocacy for change.

The third type of learning association is centred on a defined issue. Such bodies tend generally to have smaller memberships and are also often discounted because their educational activities may be less formal. They are, however, often very effective, and, depending usually entirely on their own resources, have more freedom of action in campaigning work. They encompass consumer groups, environmental groups, bodies interested in international issues from disarmament to development, cultural groups and many others. The growth of such associations is a characteristic of the late twentieth century in Britain and it is hard to pick on an exemplar, since they range from the almost hobbyist to the almost propagandist. Because it is topical, I will mention the World Development Movement, which is the campaigning arm of the main British aid charities and has recently succeeded in gaining a judicial ruling that to spend British aid money on the Pergau Dam in Malaysia was an abuse of power. Behind the campaigning is the Development Education Association, whose members do a great deal of solid educational work. Their work is needed at present, since prevailing school curricula allow little room for such topics.

All this has been descriptive for several reasons. First, with ever-widening access to electronic media, it is a moot point that the sophisticated and often highly attractive documentary is a better means of education than an adult group meeting often in quite primitive conditions. What these descriptions show is that adult learning under the aegis of a voluntary organisation can mobilise people for change; radio and television cannot. Quite apart from the question of who owns these media and with what agenda, sustained research, reflection, advocacy and campaigning are not subject to soundbite. Moreover, a

television programme cannot present a 40,000 signature petition or take the Foreign Secretary to court.

Secondly, looking at the nature of voluntary adult education organisations and having asserted their worth leaves us in a better position to make a critique of their operation and to see if there are types of association missing from the scene.

4. A New Look for Voluntary Organisations

What is missing in adult education at the present day? We have a sad lack still, in spite of all the organisations, of ***political*** education on any scale. This cannot be done without some government financing, and other European countries provide this. The Danish government paid out the equivalent of a million pounds to educate its people on the issues involved in the Maastricht Treaty and in joining or not joining the European Union; in Britain it was left to a private individual to print copies of the Treaty for the public to buy. In Germany, whose recent history gives its people a better understanding of the need for education to conserve democracy, political education is very substantially subsidised. In North Rhine Westphalia, for example, some seventy adult education organisations are helped with money, books, and videos to promote adult political learning. And in addition, German political parties have publicly-funded educational sections.

Here, we have recently seen a great disillusion with politics and politicians. If we are to develop credibility for political processes and for some continuing form of democratic government, political education is essential. Politicians themselves need to be learners, to be reminded that they are there to use their judgement, conscience and intelligence on behalf of their electors; and those electors should be enabled to be knowledgeable enough to invigilate over MPs' performance as well as making their own informed views clear. Such education cannot be in the hands of formal institutions, or it would be subject to the same kind of mistrust which it attracted in the Soviet empire. It would clearly need to be placed with some of the voluntary organisations which I have described. Since they are in the hands of members, and since they already have some experience in encouraging discussion of serious public questions, they should have the necessary distance from government and also the basic skills to take on such a role. The smaller,

special-interest associations would be able to share their research and knowledge more widely in such conditions.

Perhaps it seems utopian to imagine government fostering or funding political education. But those who use the rhetoric of "active citizenship" need to have their bluff called: reflective citizenship comes before active citizenship. Political education makes the reflection possible.

I have said that our adult education bodies have the basic skills. But we have, in all honesty, to ask how adequate they would be to such a task, or to any other major new educational tasks outside the treadmill of certificates and special provision onto which they have been whipped by the Further Education Funding Council and its like. My conviction of the importance of these membership learning bodies has already been made plain, and I sincerely believe that they are essential to the working of any democratic system, of whatever shape. But some of the strongest and best organised, such as the WEA, are in danger of losing their way and also of losing imagination and vision.

Does this mean that the future is with the smaller, special interest groups? Their activities often provide Milton's "healthful commotions", but there ought also to be a coalition of these groups, perhaps built on an enlargement of the Adult Education Forum, which can take a strategic look at potential for new growth, and which can also campaign for a broad view of adult education with social-political relevance and perhaps links with community development (as I shall advocate later). A coalition of this kind would *not*, emphatically, be a Mark Two National Institute. NIACE provides first-class service to its constituency, has raised the profile of adult education and has fostered many learning initiatives. But alongside it, with a wider geographical spread, we need as well the type of agency which has a strong remit for educational change and which directly represents a spectrum of adult learners.

The suggestion of a coalition, expressing views on adult education policies with authenticity as representative of adult learners, implies an assumption that membership bodies organise learning *for* their members. This opens another debate. I have been describing learning organisations which arrange learning opportunities for their members – this is the basis for a negotiated curriculum and for reflection leading to collective action. The defect in much writing about such curricula and such action is that it leaves out an organisational framework. Voluntary

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bodies in which members set up such curricula and decide on such action make up that defect.

At present, at least one major voluntary organisation, the WEA, has an unexpressed identity crisis. Its core activities are for and by its members, but the discourse of "provision" and the funding conditions mean that more and more of its work is done for others, who are not members and whom existing members do not see as sharers in the inherited WEA project. It will not be long before an open decision will have to be made: will it continue to organise learning activities mainly for members and assume that learners in all its classes are seriously offered the choice of becoming members? or will it transform itself openly into an organisation of members contributing subscriptions to help others gain access to learning, that is operate more like the Educational Centres Association in this country or Oxfam when it runs educational programmes in poor countries? Either position is tenable and respect-worthy, but at present the Association has not openly faced up to the choice. In either case, it could continue with a campaigning role, and in either case I would hope (and expect) that it would continue to be a voice for educational change. In the latter case, it would move closer to institutional providers, but would, in my personal view, lose its power as a representative agency.

Whatever the ultimate outcome, the existence of the WEA, the ECA and others depends on a perception of adult education as a *movement*. The movement would, as I have said, be revitalised by new curricula, new strategies and, above all, by a new and creative vision. We need a Mansbridge for the twenty-first century, who will look clearly at our social and economic problems and organise people to face them and move to solve them.

5. The Future: Some Visionary Gleams

For the adult education movement, what *is* the way forward? I cannot offer a coherent vision, but here are some visionary gleams.

First, education is about constant enquiry, and we should be questioning the orthodoxies of our day (as Milton questioned those of his). Should we seriously accept that "the market" is a sort of immanent will to which education is subject? Or should we not remember the comment of August Bebel that the free market is just "the free fox in the free hen-run"? One of the WEA forebears, R H Tawney, said: "A

nation is not civilised because a handful of its members are successful in acquiring large sums of money and in persuading their fellows that a catastrophe will occur if they do not acquire it" (Tawney, 1929). In the world outside Britain the new ideas of the 1990s include the notion of **human development** as promoted by the United Nations Development Programme. Such development is seen as three-fold: increase in wealth, yes, but also a wider distribution of education and health – in short, a better quality of life more equitably shared. The UNDP uses its Human Development Index to construct a kind of international league table. The UK is tenth on that table, but slipping down, particularly in the health component – there are fifteen countries with a higher life expectancy figure. We also spend less of our Gross Domestic Product on education than any other of the top twenty industrial countries. When a gender dimension is factored in to human development, the UK slides down below the top twenty. We should be arguing for education as an element in human development and in improving the quality of life; and we should not allow the market and the rhetoric of choice to be used as an alibi for removing moral judgement from political decisions, especially those affecting poor people's educational rights.

Secondly, I should like us to be ready to link adult education more closely to community development. There are many precedents: work done with the unemployed by WEA branches such as Lincoln in the 1930s, by this University in the 1980s, the WEA again in Gateshead in the 1990s; the attempt at a continuing alliance between adult education and community development in the Scottish Community Education Service. But community development seems now to be seen either as an arm of social welfare or, in its physical components, as the responsibility of non-elected public bodies – development corporations and such. The educational link must not be lost, since education gives people at least an informed voice in decisions, at best the ownership of a project. This is part of empowerment – remember Rajkumari, whose community development work gave her courage. A project may be very modest or quite grandiose, but it must evolve from a favouring atmosphere in the voluntary organisation arranging the learning programme.

Thirdly, while one part of adult education is firmly in localities and communities, another part must be reaching out internationally. We are in an era of the so-called "globalisation of learning" – really at

present the development of new means of transnational communication and exchange of information across the rich countries, while the poor countries are left behind (of every 20 computers in the world, 19 are in the rich countries). While we may have strong views about that unequal relationship (and I do), the point here is that there are opportunities for members of voluntary learning organisations to have at their fingertips large masses of material. With EU support, the WEA has become involved in two IT networking schemes, and I would hope that money would become available for more. In the new millennium, all voluntary agencies' members should have access to the technology, for learning purposes. We must avoid seeing IT as largely for management information, however useful that is. After all, literacy and numeracy both evolved for managerial purposes – keeping track of royal treasures in the Middle East – but when Milton was arguing so passionately that people should be able to read what they liked, he was not thinking of accounts, but of polemic, theory and poetry.

A fourth gleam is related to both the national and the international context. Many of us learn in school or in adult courses how to make some judgements on the quality and veracity of the printed word. But we are now bombarded with words on computer screens and glossy images on the television screens and we have very few criteria by which to assess their reliability. Should we be thinking of a whole new adult curriculum of critical appraisal of national and international communication, using as a starting-point the work done in some universities on media studies? This goes back to my aside earlier about ownership. So much satellite television is controlled by so few people; and in the nature of much computer information it provides few alternatives, while the gatekeepers, the suppliers of data bases, are also quite few. What they produce requires to be looked at with both scepticism and discrimination.

These four suggestions – questioning orthodoxies, including a community development dimension, seizing the opportunity for international communication and studying ways of assessing information supplied by computer or the mass electronic media – are directly about adult learning. Let me say something about strategies to promote such curricular principles.

First, let us hold our heads up. Let us, in voluntary learning organisations, follow the lead of NIACE and publicise what we do and what we are about. For people engaged in communication for learning,

we sometimes seem rather inefficient about, even insensitive to, public relations for our organisations. The Townswomen's Guilds have their own radio recording studio and distribute their programmes, with sponsorship, to a number of stations. Do any others have any way of telling the community what they are about? The Mansbridge round-the-kitchen-table style is one legacy which we have to discard.

A second strategy would be to strengthen alliances between voluntary organisations in this country (I have already mentioned possible new roles for the Forum) and also to use our greater ease of communication to strengthen international partnerships. More alliances in Europe and more alliances with learning organisations beyond Europe would give increased strength and clout to all of us.

6. Conclusion: Waxing Young Again

My colleague at the University of Warwick, Dr Malcolm Tight, recently published an article on *Utopia and the Education of Adults* (Tight, 1994). He urges that: "Maybe the time is now ripe to revisit utopia and refresh our inspiration. We are, after all, fast approaching a time when lifelong education, or whatever you wish to call it, will become essential for the majority of adults in western societies . . . unless those concerned with the education of adults can articulate a meaningful and engaging vision of this future, we are likely to find ourselves ever more constrained by the mundane dystopias served on us by those who lack this concern". Whether or not one wants to limit interest to a majority and to western countries (and I would not), his call is powerful. If we do not use our imaginations and stand up for our convictions in adult learning organisations, we will, as Milton says, "sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition". To me, the word utopia implies the unattainable and I would prefer an alternative expression, but I wholeheartedly agree that we must have a "meaningful and engaging vision". From our past we have some principles on which to build it: the Miltonic ideal of free and open learning for all; the Mansbridge ideal of learning for a social purpose; and the postulation of many that educated citizens are necessary to the functioning of democracy. We also have a practical mechanism to bring our vision nearer to reality; that is, the voluntary adult education organisation, of which the WEA was an archetype. With that

inheritance, we should be able to grasp the potential of the new millennium.

I will leave the peroration to Milton:

> It betokens us not degenerated, nor drooping in a fatal decay, but casting off the old and wrinkled skin of corruption to outlive these pangs and wax young again . . . Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation, raising herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full mid-day beam; purging and unscaling her long-abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also who love the twilight, flutter about amazed at what she means . . .

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